DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 234 602 FL 013 855

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TITLE Teaching Pronunciation Communicatively.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Los Angeles, CA, October 1982).
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
JOURNAL CIT MEXTESOL Journal; v7 n1 p10-25 Apr 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communicative Competence (Languages); *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Learning Activities; *Pronunciation Instruction; Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Methods designed to effectively teach pronunciation to university level nonnative speakers of English are described. Following a historical overview of educators' attitudes toward the relative importance of teaching pronunciation, teaching techniques that have been used in the past are surveyed. The relevance of the communicative approach is discussed. To apply this approach to the teaching of English pronunciation, four steps should be employed: (1) identify sounds that are problematic for the class, (2) look for contexts that naturally offer an abundance of lexical items with these target sounds, (3) develop communication oriented tasks requiring the use of these words, and (4) develop several exercises for each problem area to reinforce learning. Several pronunciation exercises are presented to illustrate these principles. It is concluded that by making systematic use of communicative activities in the pronunciation classes, students can have the opportunity to practice pronunciation in a way that better facilitates transfer to the real communication of the outside world. (RW)

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MEXTESOL Journal, Vol VII, No 1, Apr 83

Teaching Pronunciation Communicatively[1]

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This paper describes the author's ongoing attempts to improve the effectiveness of the pronunciation activities she provides her students, who are university-level non-native speakers of English.

Following a brief historical overview of attitudes in EFL towards the relative importance of teaching pronunciation, the paper surveys teaching techniques that have been used in the past. Then a strategy more nearly in line with the philosophy of the Communicative Approach is proposed, and sample exercises developed by the author are provided.

Refinements to the proposed strategy are still needed, especially for teaching stress and intonation. However, activities such as those described in the paper are currently enabling the author's students to improve the quality of their English pronunciation in free conversation—something that rarely occurred when she was using the more manipulative, traditional types of exercises.

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I. Introduction[2]

Over the past 15 years I have frequently been called upon to teach classes in pronunciation (i.e. "practical phonetics") for non-native speakers of English. My experiences have been both fascinating and frustrating. I have been fascinated by the fact that pronun-

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ciation is the area where native language interference is most obvious and persistent and where affective factors are much more important than are cognitive skills. I have been frustrated because until recently most of my students had made little progress even though I had provided plenty of practice. There was always the nagging question as to whether I was accomplishing anything at all by teaching pronunciation, whether I wouldn't be better serving my students by teaching them reading comprehension or vocabulary, for example.

The history of foreign language instruction reveals that there have been many differences of opinion over the years about the value of teaching pronunciation and about how best to teach it. The Grammar-translation and Reading-based Approaches have viewed pronunciation as irrelevant. The Direct Method has claimed that pronunciation is very important and presents it via teacher modeling; the teacher is ideally a native or near-native speaker of the target language. In the Audio-lingual Approach pronunciation is likewise very important. The teacher also models and the students repeat; however, the teacher now has the assistance of a structurally-based teaching device: the minimal pair drill:[3]

E.g. hit/heat
rice/lice
sin/sing

The Cognitive Code Approach de-emphasized pronunciation in favor of grammar and vocabulary because the conventional wisdom of the 60's and early 70's (see Scovel 1969) held that native-like pronunciation couldn't be taught anyway. And, by extension, it was argued that pronunciation shouldn't be taught at all.

More recently, however, the Communicative Approach has brought new urgency to the teaching of pronunciation since it has been empirically demonstrated by Hinofotis and Bailey (1980) that there is a threshold level of pronunciation in English such that if a given non-native speaker's pronunciation falls below this level, he will not be able to communicate orally no matter how good his control of English grammar and vocabulary might be.

If a teacher who is interested in helping students achieve communicative competence in a foreign language must teach at least

enough pronunciation to get the students above the threshold level, what activities should be used? How does one teach pronunciation communicatively?[4]

II. Exercises and Drills that Teachers Have Used Previously

Perhaps we can begin to find answers to these questions by first reviewing what teachers have done to teach English pronunciation--without great success--in the past.

A typical technique has been for students to listen to the teacher, or some other model, and then imitate or repeat, with the teacher offering correction. This technique originated with the Direct Method. There were also the tongue twisters and special phrases borrowed from work in speech correction for native speakers (e.g. "She sells seashells by the seashore; The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.") Then there were the minimal pair drills from audiolingualism (see, for example, Nilsen and Nilsen 1971):

- words: it eat
- sentences:
  - pardigmatic drills
    Don't (slip/sleep) on the floor.
  - syntagmatic drills
    Don't sit on that seat.

From developmental psycholinguistics some teachers adopted a drill of successive approximation following first language pronunciation development.

E.g. w → r wed → red y → l yes → less

With the advent of generative phonology as described by Chomsky and Halle (1968), some English language teachers focused a certain amount of class time on practicing vowel shifts (e.g. /aɪ/ Bible /ɪ/ Biblical) and stress shifts (e.g. phótograph - photógraphy).

There has always been other optional baggage such as a phonetic alphabet along with the question of whether or not students should be

able to read phonetically transcribed passages, or even whether or not they should practice writing down such transcriptions themselves. Where such extreme practices have been implemented, a course in pronunciation becomes nothing more than an introduction to descriptive phonetics.

These artificial techniques and approaches entail many problems. Let me itemize some of my objections to these practices--objections which stem from theoretical considerations as well as practical experience.

1. Students learn to produce some selected sounds in a controlled situation in class, but what they learn does not readily transfer to real language use.

2. There is too much focus on minimal pairs and on isolated words or sentences with little or no attention given to communication. (Only a few minimal pairs are ever confused in conversation because context helps resolve the majority of such potential problems.)

3. Many pronunciation problems do not lend themselves well to minimal-pair drill (e.g. /u/ wooed vs. /ʊ/ would).

4. Most teachers simply can't handle a word-level minimal pair drill effectively because it is artificial and not conducive to the use of the intonation patterns and phrase-based rhythm found in natural conversation.

Like most of my colleagues, I started out by using the Audiolingual method and materials for teaching pronunciation. This was about 15 years ago. However, since then, I have gradually been forced to reassess and modify my teaching approach because manipulative drilling with minimal pairs--contextualized or otherwise--effected little improvement in my students' pronunciation. When they left the phonetics class and used English in spontaneous conversation, nothing we had done in class seemed to have had any impact.

III. Relevance of the Communicative Approach

The Communicative Approach to foreign language teaching as articulated by Brumfit and Johnson (1979), Widdowson (1978) and others offers us guidelines and directions for improving the teaching of English pronunciation even though the literature and materials produced by the Communicative Approach have not dealt much with the teaching of pronunciation per se. In fact,the only readily available texts I have found containing some exercises that can be adapted fairly easily to my communicative techniques are Hecht and Ryan (1978), Gilbert (1983) and Morley (1976).

The manipulative exercises and drills described above in Section II are rejected by proponents of the Communicative Approach because they are too teacher-centered and not conducive to facilitating student-student communication. Thus we must think of communicative tasks, games, problem-solving activities and situations for role-playing which reasonably simulate genuine communication, but which also have pronunciation rather than notions, functions, vocabulary, etc. as the teaching objective. If we can discover ways of doing this, our teaching of English pronunciation will be more successful because our students will be better motivated to make their English speech clearer and more comprehensible.

IV. A Strategy and Sample Exercises

In my attempt to apply the Communicative Approach to the teaching of English pronunciation, I have developed the following strategy:

1) Identify sounds or contrasts that are problematic for the students in a given class.

2) Look for contexts that offer naturally--not artificially --an abundance of lexical items with these target sounds.

3) Develop communication-oriented tasks that require the use of these words--tasks such as games, problem-solving activities, information grids, dialogs or role-playing situations.

4) Develop several exercises for each problem area (at least three) so that any given teaching point can be periodically recycled with new contexts and new words, and then practiced as often as needed.

The following exercises are some of those that I have developed as I have applied this strategy to the teaching of the two th sounds in English (voiceless/θ/ and voiced /ð/), which do not lend themselves well to practice with minimal pairs. I have used body parts to focus initially on /θ/:

mouth
tooth/teeth
throat
thumb
thigh

The practice activity involves a brief role-play between a doctor or a dentist and a patient. The student playing the patient receives a card with a drawing of the body part that hurts and the doctor receives a card with commands that cue the questions he should ask the patient (e.g. "Find out what's wrong.").

E.g. Dr: What's wrong?
Patient: My throat hurts.
Dr: How long has it hurt you?

Etc.

A few sessions later I use a calendar for the current month as a context for again practicing /θ/ in numbers, ordinals, and in the words Thursday and month. (The circled days will receive special emphasis.)

March, 1983

S	M	T	W	Th	F	S
		1	2	(3)	4	5
6	7	8	9	(10)	11	12
(13)	14	15	16	(17)	18	19
20	21	22	(23)	(24)	25	26
27	28	29	(30)	(31)		

For practice, one student in each pair receives the calendar and the other receives a sheet with questions to ask and with spaces for writing down the answers:

E.g.	Question	Answer
1.	How many days are there this month?	31
2.	What day this month is St. Patrick's Day?	the 17th
3.	What day of the week is that?	Thursday

Etc.

A few sessions later, to focus on /ʃ/, I use kinship terms since many of the common ones have this sound:

(grand)mother
(grand)father
brother(-in-law)
sister(-in-law)

Practice can be done in groups of four or five. One student with a large family will answer questions while the others will ask at least two questions each by drawing on the eight kinship terms implied in the above list. Cards can be used to cue the kinship terms; the questions should be original and the responses true.

E.g.	Cards	Questions	Responses
	grandfather	Is your grandfather alive?	Yes.
	mother	What's your mother's name?	Olivia.
	brother	Do you have any brothers?	Yes, two.

Perhaps two more class sessions will pass before I introduce a final exercise in this series; it consists of a family tree that combines the above kinship terms, which focus on /ʤ/, with proper English names that focus on /θ/:

Beth	Arthur
Ruth	Garth
Martha	Theodore
Dorothy	Keith

The students then work in pairs. Each one has a partial family tree and must complete his tree by eliciting the appropriate information from his partner:

E.g. Who is Garth's mother?
Who is Martha's brother?

Etc.

The above exercises deal with a problematic consonant contrast. I'd now like to also present a series of exercises I've adapted and developed for a problematic vowel contrast; namely, /ɪ/ as in hit versus /i/ as in heat.

At an early session body parts are used as a focus for practicing /ɪ/:

lips	ribs	hip(s)	shin
chin	wrist	finger	

A large poster with a cartoon-like drawing of a man in a bathing suit named Bill--not very detailed but detailed enough to focus on the vocabulary listed above-- is presented to the class. In order for the vocabulary to be reviewed, a line and a number identify each target body part on the drawing. Cards in a paper bag with pictures

of these body parts are drawn, one at a time, by students who do not reveal the card to the class, but instead ask their classmates (or the members of their group if the class is large): "Bill fell down. What did he hurt?" The members of the class or group must then guess, and the student with the card says "yes" or "no":

Did {Bill / he} hurt his shin?	No.
Did he hurt his finger?	No.
Did he hurt his wrist?	Yes.

Several sessions later I focus on the /i/ sound using "A Day at the Zoo" as the context. Line drawings of several animals are used to introduce the vocabulary:

zebra	cheetah	peacock
seal	emu	beaver

Students are paired up with complementary maps of a zoo; one map gives the location of three of these animals, the other map gives the location of the remaining three animals. Each student must write down the names of the three missing animals in the proper places on his map by eliciting information from his partner that makes use of compass directions (N, S, E, W) and environmental features that are indicated on both versions of the map (e.g. palm trees, the beach, the lagoon, the rocks, the stream, etc.).

X: Where is the cheetah?
Y: It's (to the) south of the rocks.
Y: Where is the peacock?
X: It's next to the palm trees. West of them.

A few sessions later the class will integrate practice with /i/ and /ɪ/ using a role-playing situation involving a customer and a waiter/waitress in a restaurant.[5] Each participant receives a copy of the menu.

Dinner Menu

First course:

chicken soup
or
fish salad

Main course:

liver or veal or beef

Vegetable:

peas or beans or spinach

Salad

Dessert:

cheesecake or ice cream or
mint sherbet

Beverages:

tea or milk or mineral water

With the students working in pairs, one student will play the customer, the other will play the waiter. To check for accuracy of communication each participant circles the items he has "ordered" or "taken down" from the menu. (He may not, however, show his partner his copy of the menu until the entire role-play is completed.) Typical questions should be reviewed before the role play starts. For example,

-What {would you like / will you have} for the first course?

-The second course?

-Which vegetable?

-And for dessert?

-What {would you like / will you have} to drink?

V. Conclusion

By making systematic use of such communicative activities in my pronunciation classes, I am helping my students to practice pronunciation in a way that better facilitates transfer to the real communication they will carry on outside of class. My current students also seem to enjoy this type of practice much more than my former students ever did the traditional manipulative exercises.

However, I do not want to leave the reader with the impression that the traditional techniques are never applicable. On a limited,

individual basis, it may in fact be useful for a teacher to assign manipulative drills to a well-motivated student who can't master a given sound or contrast despite the use of communicative exercises. For such students individual work with minimal pairs, tongue twisters, or successive approximation drills may still be a necessary and useful supplement. The point I wish to emphasize here is that I do not feel that instruction should begin with such drills; however, I still use them selectively when necessary and with those individuals who want and need such exercises. In certain cases, articulatory explanations of sounds can also be useful, but they should likewise be used on a selective basis and not presented as a lecture to the class.

In addition to the use of communicative activities, I must vary classroom practice so that my students don't get bored or lose interest. I have found that practicing and reciting manageable segments of poetry, light verse, or song lyrics[6] that reinforce sounds we have practiced, can frequently serve this purpose. "The Eagle" by Tennyson and "The Turtle" by Ogden Nash are examples of selections I have used in this way. Another excellent and even more authentic type of practice can be carried out using carefully selected excerpts from plays. My colleague Clifford Prator, who first made me aware of the great potential that play-reading offers for teaching pronunciation, has often used excerpts from Thorton Wilder's Our Town. I prefer using excerpts from The Odd Couple by Neil Simon, but my motivation for using such material is identical to Prator's: give students a chance to read aloud or even act out whole chunks of dramatic conversation where they have to use the stress, intonation, and phrasing appropriate to a given character in a given situation. This is pronunciation practice at its most demanding--something that can be challenging even for native speakers.

A caveat I must include in this discussion is that I don't feel students should have to worry about pronunciation at the very beginning stage of learning English. Research in first and second language acquisition suggests that teaching priorities for language areas should be vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation--in that order. For literate students there is no particular skill order other than that practice in listening comprehension should precede any of the other three skills (speaking, reading, writing).

The one glaring omission in my current approach--one that I am fully aware of--is that I am still having problems with fully integrating stress and intonation (some call these features accent and pitch) into my teaching of English pronunciation. Methodologists have often argued that this area is as important as, if not more important than, sounds per se. And I tend to agree. The problem is to decide what one should do about it.

Linguists have recently made important contributions to the analysis of stress and intonation (see Gunter 1974) and Brazil et al. (1980), and some very good techniques such as those suggested by Allen (1971) have been available to us for some time now. I use these suggestions, yet am not satisfied with the results. This is an area that I and other teachers must continue to work with and improve.[7] However, the fact that the focus of my pronunciation instruction now very explicitly centers on communication rather than manipulation means that I can also indirectly encourage practice of appropriate stress and intonation through modeling and correction.

Ultimately, of course, I want to be able to explicitly facilitate communicative practice of English stress and intonation in as effective a manner as I am now able to deal with English sounds.

Notes

[1]Oral versions of this paper were presented at the Los Angeles Regional CATESOL meeting in October, 1982, and as the introductory remarks to a three-hour workshop at the 1983 TESOL Convention in Toronto.

[2]I am grateful to Dr. Roger Bowers of the British Council and Ms Josephine Lewkowicz of the British Overseas Development Administration for being catalysts to my work in this area. I became acquainted with them while working with the Curriculum Development Project of the Center for Developing English Language Teaching at Ain Shams University in Cairo, Egypt. This was in 1980 and 1981, and they were the primary authors of the phonetics materials developed by the project. My association with the project challenged me to rethink and refocus my own changing and evolving views on the teaching of pronunciation. Even though Dr. Bowers and Ms Lewkowicz may not agree with everything I say here, I thank them for having stimulated much of the thinking that went into this paper.

[3]This device reached its apex and most usable form in the contextualized minimal pair drills of Bowen (1972, 1975).

E.g. The blacksmith { hits / heats } the horseshoe { with the hammer / in the fire }.

However, even such contextualized drills are not natural enough for the learner to automatically incorporate what he learns into his everyday conversations in English.

[4]Note that I do not suggest that the goal of teaching pronunciation should be to make the learner sound like a native speaker of English. With the exception of a few highly gifted and motivated individuals, such a goal is completely unrealistic anyway. The more modest goal I have in mind is that of enabling the learner to get above the threshold level so that the quality of his pronunciation will not inhibit his ability to communicate.

[5]Using this particular context was the idea of Bowers and Lewkowicz (see footnote 2); however, they presented the context in a dialog, whereas I feel that a role-play is a more communicative activity, and I have adapted their context to my purposes accordingly.

[6]I'd like to stress that song lyrics should be spoken and not sung if pronunciation practice is the objective. Singing distorts the sound of spoken words and phrases, of stress and intonation, thereby detracting from any pedagogical value the exercise might otherwise offer for pronunciation practice.

[7]There is, for example, some good reinforcement activity available in many of the poems of Christina Rosetti. Her poems often include many questions and answers and thus provide opportunity for intonation practice.

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